

The Chief of Staff's Book of the Quarter

This Kind of War, by T. R. Fehrenbach



"We are under general attack and heavy artillery fire near the parallel! The enemy has already seized his initial objectives. We require

immediate reinforcements!" - This frantic radio call, made in the early morning of June 25, 1950 as North Korean troops poured over the 38th parallel, signaled the beginning of the Korean War.

From its heart-pounding beginning to its frustrating conclusion, T. R. Fehrenbach's classic history of the Korean War, *This Kind Of War*, is a dramatic account of this struggle written from the perspective of those who fought it. As our nation commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Korean War, we turn our eyes to the bloody battles and political decisions surrounding this conflict.

Fehrenbach shows that five years of defense budget reductions after World War II left the U.S. military a shadow of its former self. Those who still served in the military were trained to fight with nuclear weapons on a European-type battlefield. Consequently, equipment shortages and poor combat training left U.S. troops unprepared for a war up and down the Korean peninsula.

Task Force Smith, commanded by Colonel Charles B. Smith, comprised 400 men. They were the first troops designated to go into Korea by air. With radios that didn't work, weapons that were obsolete, and men not ready for close combat, the untrained 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry was sent in piecemeal to bluff the enemy into halting its advance only to be crushed by a superior invasion force.

Fehrenbach highlights other battles to include the early struggles at Taejon and Seoul, MacArthur's Inchon landings, the 1st Marine Division's retreat from the frigid Chosin Reservoir, the fighting of the

2nd Infantry Division at Heartbreak Ridge, and the eventual stalemate of the combatants to include the bloody fight at Pork Chop Hill. Despite the U.S. and South Korean soldiers' early defeats, they slowly and painfully adapted to their environment, but at a great price.

Although considered a classic, this book is criticized as overly concerned with the ground campaign and ignoring the efforts of the Air Force. However, the author writes from this perspective because he was a combat leader at platoon, company, and battalion levels during this war. Partly drawn from official records, operations journals, and histories, Fehrenbach uses his experience and many personal interviews to describe the feelings, pressures, and fears of the soldiers, which enable the reader to understand the actions and frustrations of those who fought.

The author sees several lessons learned from this war. Fehrenbach states that disasters occur every time an army is mentally and physically unprepared to fight. Soldiers live and die by their training, and units must be trained for contingency, short-notice operations with proper equipment. Gradual deployment is a prescription for catastrophe. Furthermore, policy-makers must account for the support of the American public in their political and military planning. Fehrenbach argues that Americans need a strong unifying emotion to motivate themselves to go to war. Written before the Vietnam War, the book foretells some of the problems of that war with eerie accuracy. Fifty years later, this narrative still has strong applications for us today as it chronicles the story of military and political unpreparedness that led to a great loss of American lives in Korea.

Editor's Note: *Each quarter, one of the books from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Reading List will be spot-lighted as the book of the quarter. Air Force members of all ranks and grades are encouraged to read the featured title available at all Air Force libraries. For details on forming a book discussion group visit the CSAF's Reading List web site: <http://www.af.mil/readinglist>.*

"What [Fehrenbach] does best of all, and what is so memorable, is his eloquent, sometimes painful description of the GIs who must bear the burden of good and bad decisions. This is the awful beauty of this book." – General Colin Powell